

NEOMORPHOSIS: THE ART OF RADICAL CHANGE

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A little reflection reveals three pedagogical problems intrinsic to inducing fundamental alterations of consciousness: First, consciousness must be persuaded that there is a world outside its Cave; second, it must be persuaded that the other world is benign¹; third, a technique must be found which will enable it to give up the security of its Cave. The first two problems receive scant attention, while the third has become a central focus for the "New Age". The recent profusion of techniques for transforming consciousness is reminiscent of Christianity following Luther -- once the resident authority has been challenged successfully, self-styled saviours sally forth with sure-fire prescriptions for salvation. Leaving aside the relative merits of these prescriptions, let us examine the wisdom and morality of providing an escape plan prior to establishing the existence and desirability of "The Promised Land".

The great number of people attracted to "consciousness-expanding" disciplines in the past two decades apparently serves as warrant for many entrepreneurs to conclude that these "converts" are adequately persuaded -- that all they need is a push in the right direction. One might as well conclude that those who "come forward" at a revival meeting have transcended ego and are now capable of agapeistic love. Surely no argument is needed to establish that many who rush to the "new" consciousness disciplines are thrill-seekers. Bored or disillusioned with their lives, and having heard sensationalistic accounts from those who have learned to subsist on horse dung (or whatever), they plunge headlong into the dung-heap. Their consciousness is indeed expanded (most of them had never before experienced living on such a diet), and the horse dung purveyors profit, so everyone is happy -- for a while.

The agility with which some seekers move from T.M. to est to bioenergetics to . . . is awe-inspiring, but somewhat disconcerting. It arouses suspicion concerning the nature of their quest. Are they truly seeking release from the constraints of ego, or are they hungry ghosts²? The question is rhetorical, of course. Just as the teenager's idea of true love is a relationship which persists after a night's sleep, so the conception of emancipation harbored by these "grasshoppers": The true path is that one which enables the pilgrim to lose weight, or stop smoking, or gain friends, . . . , or realize a social benefit of any kind. They seek social adjustment, not enlightenment.

The attempt to improve one's social self ought not to be disparaged. It is a worthy enterprise, but it ought not to be confused with a spiritual quest. Pandering to ego is not emancipation from ego. All of the great mystical traditions have stressed the necessity for ego-transcendence, warning humanity of the dangers inherent in ego-pampering. Arrogantly heedless of such warnings, post-Renaissance Western civilization has elevated self-indulgence to the status of supreme virtue, thereby turning the world into a nightmare of adolescent profligacy.

Contact with the tinsel society tempts one to follow a superficial rendition of

1. Conflation of the first two problems is defensible, but for the purpose of this essay separating them seems the better course.

2. The realm of the hungry ghosts, or pretas, is one of the six realms of mind in Buddhist psychology. It is the realm in which consumption brings no satisfaction; regardless of how much you "eat", the hunger remains.

Kierkegaard³, deploring "the immediate men . . . who tranquilize themselves with the trivial". But deploring spiritual adolescence is as silly as deploring the short stature of children. On the other hand, condemnation of a belief system which stunts spiritual growth is at least as laudable as condemnation of a diet which impairs physical growth. We ought to do whatever we can to ensure the opportunity for growth, but guaranteeing growth would be antithetical to manifest consciousness, for what distinguishes manifest consciousness from Consciousness is limitation. Guaranteeing growth would have the same sort of consequences as guaranteeing life: Whatever is guaranteed becomes worthless. The notion that value is inversely proportional to ease of attainment is as old as humanity. It permeates every level of life. We find it stated as a basic principle in all cultures. Perusal of the classical Greek statement will serve as well as any:

THE LAW OF PATHEI MATHOS

Zeus, who taught men to think, has laid it down
that wisdom comes only through suffering.⁴

-- Aeschylus

To which the offspring of Eros reply: "Then give us knowledge, and leave wisdom to those who don't know how to have fun!". Habituated to the litany of Human Prerogatives, they are deaf to the hollow tone of their voices, and dreadful of even a momentary stillness which would reveal their inner emptiness. Thus Culture, the Noise generated by Fear, the Comfort perpetuating separation, the Great Lie, the Veil simultaneously cursed and cherished.

One wonders whether Zeus is amused or dismayed at the sight of humans scurrying frantically about to keep the Veil in place. But he must have known what they would do with the power of thought. Perhaps he is privy to a greater plan. Perhaps thought is to the human soul as gravity is to matter: irresistible but requiring resistance. No resistance, no gravity; no Veil, no thought. Wisdom comes when resistance is exhausted, when suffering has reached the limit, when one lets go of it all and penetrates the Veil. Violate the Veil and suffering ceases, the distance separating thought from its objects collapses, and the myriad forms comprising reality melt into Oblivion.

The Terror which humans sense when threatened with genuine intimacy is evidence for the universality of this schema. Dropping the final veil, the Seventh Veil, is the Great Death, Great Satori, Turiya, Union with God. For the vast majority of souls this Terror so overshadows hells of enduring torment that choosing between the two courses is easy. Torment, however horrible, nonetheless ensures

3. In fairness to Kierkegaard, it should be noted that he was clearly attacking the perversion of Christ's teachings which he held responsible for the "immediate men", not the individual victims of the belief system.

4. To avoid the kind of misunderstanding which vitiates much recent scholarship, it is well to note that 'suffer' derives from the Latin 'sub-ferre', to bear under, to support, hence to endure. Since the advent of cosmic paranoia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Western man has shifted the meaning of 'suffer' in accordance with the rampant hedonism, so that today the term applies exclusively to enduring pain. The O.E.D. devotes one and one-half pages to an elucidation of its use. Unless otherwise indicated, 'suffer' and its cognates will be used in the original sense in this essay.

separation -- tormenter and tormented.

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, First Elegy

With cupboard-love loyalty, incarnate souls cling tenaciously to their interpreted reality. Dimly but deeply aware of the truth of Zeus' dictum, they concoct all manner of proscriptions against seeing into the heart of things, and salve their collective conscience with knowledge of the limits of their awareness. The profound longing emanating from the core of their being is interpreted as need for food, or sex, or social acceptance. Knowledge enables them to devise strategies for satisfying these needs. Then, glutted with nourishment for only their samsaric hunger, the persisting sense of incompleteness drives them to heinous crimes against their environment, other humans, and themselves.

Ought not these oldest sufferings to be bearing more fruit by now?
Is it not time that, in loving, we freed ourselves from the loved one
and quivering, endured? For staying is nowhere.

-- ibidem

But so intent are they upon their myopic quest that humans rarely hear the sages. Of the one hundred twenty-one states of consciousness identified and studied in Buddhist psychology, only three involve pain, sixty-three are joyful, and fifty-five are indifferent. Humans naïvely strive to avoid the three, and so successfully occupy their energies with the effort that they fail to notice the cause of suffering: attachment. That humanity should dote on the very element ensuring misery is surely revelatory of a fundamental perversion. The common cure for this perversion seems to be exhaustion of the energy necessary to perpetuate it. The disease is so virulent that none escape without passing through the vicissitudes of attachment to the flesh, attachment to thought, and attachment to Being.

In 1978 the Monroe Institute of Applied Sciences held a workshop at the Feathered Pipe Ranch, just outside Helena, Montana. Robert Monroe gave a talk one evening, outlining some of the characteristics of "Locale II". At one point during his presentation I asked whether there is anything resembling our conception of morality in Locale II. He did not respond immediately, but after pondering for a while, said "Yes. Suppose you are drowning. They will save you, but not until after you have had the experience of drowning.". Bob's statement is another way of expressing the law of Pathei Mathos. In thirty years of teaching philosophy I have not found a more profound ethical principle. The world's great sages have long viewed it as a sine qua non of wisdom. Once the self-serving parochial definition of 'suffer' is transcended, it becomes clear that to endure is to live through, to experience, the entire pleasure/pain spectrum.

The claim made by this principle, however it is stated, is in direct opposition to vicarious experiencing. Vicariousness insulates against the threat of intimacy,

yielding a tincture of the original experience -- a mere shadow⁵. The shadow-experiences leave us starving with bloated bellies, but conditioned to the vicarious we know not where to look for genuine sustenance and stupidly strive to compensate for lack of quality with ever-greater quantities. Insulation comes in a variety of forms to satisfy different tastes and situations. The garden varieties -- affected vulgarity, addiction to chemicals, devotion to an *idée fixe*, idolatry, false humility, etc. -- need not detain us, for all are expressions of Fear. It is the fear, of course, of learning that we are not what we pretend to be. A society of the fearful results from a tacit agreement not to expose each other, thus we can live comfortably in a Common Cave with compounded insulation. Trapped in the Common Cave of its own design, bloated with food-surrogates, embalmed with alcohol, and grossly overloaded with trivia, modern humanity can see only thicker insulation as the solution to its intolerable predicament⁶.

However lofty the motives of those who propose methods to facilitate the evolution of consciousness, ardent Cave-dwellers either reject them or vulgarize them into more insulation. Our well-meaning but misguided attempts to diminish or eliminate suffering, thereby short-circuiting the Perennial Philosophy⁷, may appear to bear fruit, but the fruit invariably turns out to be a poor copy of the real thing. Instant enlightenment is like instant sex: nothing but glitter; the essence is lost. Only those who have suffered sufficiently can see the Terror of intimacy for what it is -- a phantom collectively projected to ensure perpetuation of the ego-illusion.

. . . a selfless orientation is required in which Reality, Truth, or God is served for its own sake, just as a carpenter might finish the underside of a chair out of a sense that it is called for, whether or not the carpenter gains anything from doing what is correct. . . . Developing that orientation requires years of the right kind of effort. Although brief glimpses of the larger reality are possible to almost anyone without such development (as in the case of spontaneous mystical experiences), it is a different matter to establish such perception as the ongoing basis of one's actions in the world. To do so necessitates a long period of skillful work.

This fundamental fact, that enlightenment requires an enduring change in a person's motivations, has a number of interesting consequences. The most important is that "the secret protects itself." No matter

5. Witness the popularity of spectator sports, spectator sex, spectator religion -- spectator life! For a penetrating account of how humanity has abdicated the responsibilities of life by transferring them to vicars, see Norman O. Brown, Love's Body, Vintage, 1966, Chapter VI.

6. It is not only philosophers who find the modern period to be one of ego-maniacal excess, doomed to catastrophic redress. For a carefully documented account from an economic perspective, see Robert Heilbroner, An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect, New York, W. W. Norton, 1974.

7. The 'Perennial Philosophy' is Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz' term for a theme found in all major traditions (though not always in their exoteric versions). The individual emerges from, and will return to, an ultimate uncreated source (The Void, God, The Infinite, etc.); the span between emergence and immergence is life, which consists of a number of developmental stages. For a superb account see Ken Wilber, Up From Eden, Anchor, 1981, pp. 3-7.

what you may say or do, if your underlying intention is selfish, and even if you are unaware that this is the case, no perception of the truth is possible. It follows that a teacher cannot bestow the truth on someone else. The capacity for the perception of the Truth must be developed -- there is no shortcut. Teachers who imply that enlightenment is in their gift are frauds. (Arthur J. Deikman, "The Evaluation of Spiritual and Utopian Groups", Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 10)

Happily, there is a growing minority not entranced by the comforts of the Cave, some of whom realize that forcing Cave-dwellers to peer outside is no more effective than forcing a child to swallow spinach. Persuading Cave-dwellers to look beyond the confines of their reality is an age-old task, and it requires the most sensitive matching of strategy to individual, great patience, persistence, and compassion -- in short, it requires what has been long-cognized as good teaching. Good teaching involves the use of every appropriate persuasive device; reliance upon the latest gimmick has always been a short-lived affair.

The solution to the first pedagogical problem posed at the outset of this essay is, then, not a simple one, nor will any particular version of it ever be final. After the dust raised by each new panacea settles, we are able to see our initial enthusiasm as unwarranted. Perhaps we would do well to learn from experience before encountering the next panacea.

The second problem is equally difficult, but for somewhat different reasons. Once persuaded that there is another side to the fence, many immediately assume that the grass is greener over there. Their selective awareness casts them into the sort of mentation responsible for the "bed-hopping" behavior so popular in recent years. Weary of a situation which no longer provides honeymoon-like thrills, they blame the "other", unmindful that the problem resides within themselves. Philosophers have long noted the human proclivity to project the negative onto Other, while claiming responsibility for only the positive⁷ -- my unhappiness is due to external factors over which I have no control, but my happiness results from my own efforts. How convenient! But the sages, from the Bhagavad Gita to Heidegger, have stressed the dangers of such self-serving selectivity. We manufacture our own hells, then waken slightly from that trance to scream "Who did this to me?". Despite all of our protestations to the contrary, we make reason the servant of animal passions.

So, upon considering the issue of whether or not the reality outside my Cave is benign, each of us unconsciously takes 'benign' to mean conducive to my welfare -- I as I am now, with the host of desires, aversions, propensities, etc., which collectively constitute my self. All valuing is done from standards, and the standards employed by an individual depend upon how that individual perceives itself. People find it impossible to value from a standard which is not theirs. We all know that some birds prize worms, but try to feel about worms the same as you feel about a gourmet meal! To value worms as a bird does, I must drop the set of limitations which make me human and adopt the set which makes me a bird. Hermes Trismegistus (c. 100-300 A.D.) admonishes against supposing that we can know God⁸ while remaining human:

7. Bertrand Russell's famous conjugation of certain "irregular" verbs illustrates: I reason; you rationalize; he, she, or it distorts truth to suit the circumstances.

8. If the name of the Christian deity limits the significance of Hermes' profound observation, then substitute Brahma, Allah, The One, or whatever you like. It is the principle that is important.

If then you do not make yourself equal to God, you cannot apprehend God; for like is known by like. Leap clear of all that is corporeal, and make yourself grow to a like expanse with that greatness which is beyond all measure; rise above all time, and become eternal, then you will apprehend God. Think that for you too nothing is impossible; deem that you too are immortal, and that you are able to grasp all things in your thought, to know every craft and every science; find your home in the haunts of every living creature; make yourself higher than all heights, and lower than all depths; bring together in yourself all opposites of quality, heat and cold, dryness and fluidity; think that you are everywhere at once, on land, at sea, in heaven; think that you are not yet begotten, that you are in the womb, that you are young, that you are old, that you have died, that you are in the world beyond the grave; grasp in your thought all this at once, all times and places, all substances and qualities and magnitudes together; then you can apprehend God. But if you shut up your soul in your body, and abase yourself, and say, "I know nothing, I can do nothing, I am afraid of earth and sea, I cannot mount to heaven; I know not what I was, nor what I shall be"; then, what have you to do with God? Your thought can grasp nothing beautiful and good, if you cleave to the body, and are evil. (Corpus Hermeticum, XI)

The enormity of the problem emerges: How does ego move outside its domain to value in accordance with some standard it does not embrace? How can I experience that which is beyond my ability to experience? The answer is absurdly simple: I can't. But if I rehearse my death assiduously (live the philosophic life⁹), the adolescent narcissism of my rigid ego will fade, giving way to selfless concern for Other, and finally to annihilation of the I-Other duality¹⁰. The ultimate state of consciousness is not an I, nor is It an Other. It is "A sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." (St. Bonaventure). There is nothing that It is, nor anything that It is not, nor is It an it. It knows not Itself, nor can It be known, for that which can know and be known must be limited.

Our "Age of Anxiety" provides abundant confirmation of the claim that all efforts to diminish the enormity of the problem serve only to translate and prolong the agony. We retire in smug satisfaction at having eliminated a human disease, then later waken in horror to find several new diseases in its stead; we applaud our cleverness in harnessing the forces of nature, then learn to our dismay that we have disrupted a very delicate balance and brought catastrophe upon ourselves; we develop social systems which secure us from the whims of a few lords, then notice an epidemic of neuroses and psychoses.

If anyone ever develops an instant enlightenment technique, all knowledge of it should be destroyed at once. Any such technique radically misses the point. Life is not a problem. Problems arise only when ego tries to avoid life. So, if there is a problem, I am the problem.

In case it is not clear, the purpose of this essay is not to proffer another solution to the great riddle of life. To do so would only add to the welter. The purpose is, rather, to expose to some degree the inanity of our effort to defeat the monster we have projected, and to recommend that we befriend it.

9. Plato said that the philosophic life is a rehearsal for death. The same view is found elsewhere, most notably in Vajrayana Buddhism and esoteric Christianity.

10. The issue of whether or not the other reality is benign vanishes, for valuing, cognizing, acting, reacting, etc. require Other.